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ABSTRACT

The future of rural schools is inextricably linked to the future of their surrounding communities, and service learning is a powerful tool for capitalizing on those links. Service learning makes students active participants in service projects that respond to community needs while furthering the academic goals of students. Service learning projects are enormously varied and may address community needs related to health, poverty, social issues, or the environment. Although most projects are implemented in the middle or high school grades, elementary school students can benefit as well. For service learning to be effective, it must be integrated into the school's ongoing curriculum, and the teacher must identify the academic objectives to be addressed through the activity. The teacher's role must change to being an organizer or facilitator, and school schedules and rules must become more flexible to accommodate service learning activities. All school and community participants should agree beforehand on an activity's basic purpose. Service learning benefits students by providing authentic learning relevant to daily life and work, promoting social values and good citizenship, teaching work skills, and improving critical thinking and self-esteem. Various examples of rural service learning projects are described, and five information resources are profiled. (SV)

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Benefits²

School Development
Community Development
Economic Development
Youth Development

THE EXPONENTIAL RESULTS OF LINKING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Issue Number Two

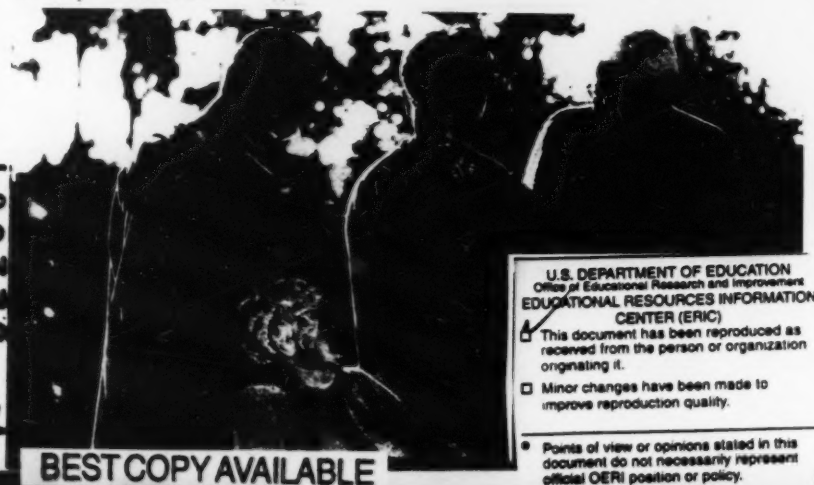
Welcome to Benefits²

Service learning: A strategy for rural school improvement and community revitalization

Benefits² is a series of issues papers focused on ways that rural schools and communities can work together so that both will thrive. School-community partnerships offer students powerful, hands-on educational experiences while contributing to the community's social, economic, and environmental well-being. As we will learn in this series, thinking innovatively and working collaboratively are keys to success.

You're an elderly resident in a tiny ranching community fifty miles from the nearest doctor's office. Your physician is concerned about your blood pressure, and wants it monitored at least once a week. What do you do?

In Balmorhea, Texas, and a number of other small towns across the rural United States, residents can turn to the school-run health clinic, where students—supervised by the school nurse—may take their blood pressure, offer information about nutrition and diet, or schedule a follow-up appointment. In some locales, students visit residents in their homes. Other schools hold periodic health fairs, offering health screening and resource information.



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These activities represent only a few examples of the ways in which rural schools and their surrounding communities are linking together for mutual benefit. Local residents get help that isn't otherwise accessible in remote, resource-strapped rural areas, while students get hands-on learning experiences, opportunities to relate to their local environment, and a much-needed sense of utility and worth.

Working together to solve mutual problems

According to many rural education experts, rural schools and their surrounding locales are so deeply interdependent that any activities benefiting the community also will bolster the school, and vice-versa. If the community thrives, the school will have a stronger tax base and a more supportive, involved citizenry on which to draw. If the school system is strong, the area can more easily attract new residents, and students will graduate with the skills and knowledge needed to maintain community vitality.

In many areas, though, schools and communities are taking a more systematic approach to enhancing their mutual destinies. Spurred in some cases by school staffs, sometimes by parents, sometimes by business or civic leaders, rural groups are establishing initiatives that include specific

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goals for both student learning and community well-being.

There are many ways to structure learning activities that meet both curricular and community goals, from student-staffed health clinics to environmental monitoring projects to student-run newspapers and other businesses. Most activities fall into one of two major categories: *service learning or entrepreneurship*. Both of these approaches (the two often overlap) are receiving greater and greater attention from educational reformers and policymakers. This issue of *Benefits*[2] focuses primarily on service learning; the next issue will provide an overview of entrepreneurial education.

Characteristics of service learning

As the name suggests, service learning is learning through community service. Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (1996, p. 593) write that

> Service learning makes students active participants in service projects that aim to respond to the needs of the community while furthering the academic goals of students...In addition to helping those they serve, such service learning activities seek to promote students' self-esteem, to develop higher-order thinking skills, to make use of multiple abilities, and to provide authentic learning experiences—all goals of current curriculum reform efforts.

Service learning projects can be enormously varied. A majority of activities tend to address community needs related to health, poverty, social issues, or the environment. Another popular category of community-based activity has students documenting local history or culture through interviews, archival research, photography, or other means. These activities do not involve direct assistance to individuals, but rather help the community at large to maintain a sense of identity and pride. Student mentoring and peer or cross-age tutoring are also classified as service learning, since they involve students helping other students.

Some service learning activities, such as student mentoring or peer tutoring, can take place right in the classroom. Others involve forays into the community or beyond. Some, such as a weekend neighborhood cleanup, may be one-time activities, while others last a semester, a school year, or even longer.

Though most service learning projects are implemented in the middle or high school grades, elementary school students can benefit as well. Lillian Stephens (1995, p. xx) likes to start with the early grades because "it has been demonstrated that all kids, from the time they first enter school, can be made aware of their responsibilities to their communities." She especially urges service learning activities for middle school students; the interdisciplinary curricular approach used in many schools is particularly adaptable to service learning. By including service learning in the early and middle grades, Stephens argues, schools can reach students who otherwise might drop out before reaching high school. She also notes that service learning is intended for *all* students:

Some service learning activities, such as student mentoring or peer tutoring, can take place right in the classroom.

> Service learning activities are not the province of any one group—the gifted, the talented, the average, or the exceptional kids. All are involved. All can serve. Furthermore, unlike the classroom, where students are rated individually, service is frequently a collaborative experience. Participants learn to work together and to accept the contributions of each. (p. 11)

Requirements for service learning

For service learning to be effective, it must be integrated into the school's ongoing curriculum. Teachers must identify the academic learning objectives to be addressed through the activity, and structure students' experiences to help assure that real learning takes place. This includes

laying the groundwork beforehand, and allowing time for reflection afterwards. In discussing the importance of reflection, Stephens recommends that students be given opportunities "to contemplate the meaning of their service, to evaluate its context and impact, thereby reaching a greater understanding of themselves, their studies, and the society" (p. 10).

Bonnie Benard (1990), in describing student peer programs, has identified a number of "ingredients" that can be generalized to other service learning experiences, especially those in which groups of students work together. These include setting mutual goals, assigning tasks so that all students have an active role, structuring groups heterogeneously, providing training in social skills, and allowing adequate time both for the hands-on activities and for group processing. Benard also recommends giving students an active role in planning as well as implementing the service learning project.

Stephens and others observe that, with service learning, the teacher's role needs to change significantly from that of managing the traditional, textbook-driven classroom. The teacher becomes an organizer and facilitator, helping to structure activities in ways that promote learning, monitoring students as they complete their hands-on activities, and facilitating students' reflection and analysis of their experiences. Teachers need to be particularly skilled in asking open-ended questions that encourage students to explore and discuss their own ideas.

With activities that take students beyond classroom boundaries, the school principal and other staff also must be prepared to make changes. These may include adopting more flexible guidelines for off-campus activities or for use of school facilities, making schedule changes to accommodate student activities, and sharing resources with others in the community. (These and similar issues will be discussed in greater detail in an upcoming issue of *Benefits*^{2}.)

Although formal school-community partnerships are not an absolute requirement, some level of community cooperation is necessary for most types of service learning activities to be successful. Students, school staffs, and community members must be able to work together to identify mutual goals; reach agreement on schedules, resources, and outcomes; and communicate effectively about how the project is proceeding. For more ambitious projects—the school-based health clinic, for example, as opposed to a neighborhood cleanup—formal partnerships can be invaluable, providing both a forum and a structure for planning and for addressing concerns as they arise. (Future issues of *Benefits*^{2} will address collaborative tools and structures that can help such partnerships to succeed.)

Some service learning activities, such as a neighborhood cleanup, may be one-time activities, while others last a semester, a school year, or even longer.

Cautions and concerns

Craig Howley and John Eckman (1997, p. 48) observe that, as is true of any instruction, community-based activities such as service learning "can be done badly or well." They urge educators to keep in mind that "the real world doesn't neatly divide itself into school subjects." Teachers must be able to help students make the links between their hands-on experiences and their academic subject matter. School staffs also must be prepared to help students cope with the unexpected, and with "things that are normally difficult for children to consider."

Those experienced with service learning also urge careful consideration of the community purposes for any given service learning activity. Kahne and Westheimer describe the differences between service learning projects that emphasize "charity" vs. those that emphasize "change," and note that conflicts can arise when participants disagree as to an activity's basic purpose (p. 594).

As Kahne and Westheimer describe it, projects focused on charity cultivate altruism, emphasizing "the importance of civic duty and the need for responsive citizens." In contrast, those focused on change "call for a curriculum that emphasizes critical reflection about social policies and conditions, the acquisition of skills of political participation, and the formation of social bonds" (p. 595). In a charity-oriented project, for example, students may provide food for homeless people. In a change-oriented project, student activity also would include investigations into the causes of homelessness, and exploration of social policies that might help to reduce the problem. Both purposes have merit; in starting a service learning activity, the concern is to be sure that you—and everyone else involved—understand which purpose the project seeks to address.

Benefits of service learning

Service learning's benefits to the community seem self-evident. Benefits to students are perhaps even more far-reaching. Service learning can provide students with the kinds of authentic learning—hands-on, interdisciplinary, oriented to problem-solving and critical thinking, grounded in students' prior experience, and relevant to daily life and work—for which educational reformers have been clamoring. In addition, as the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development points out,

> Youth service can teach young people values for citizenship, including compassion, regard for human worth and dignity, tolerance and appreciation of human diversity, and a desire for social justice. Youth service also teaches students skills for work such as collaboration, problem solving, and conflict resolution. (quoted in Stephens, p. 9)

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Resource information

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

The *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's* primary focus is on the tools and strategies for collaborative work that can help partnerships to run smoothly and to make significant, long-term contributions to both community and school. Collaborative Action Team sites set their own priorities, which may include service learning or other kinds of activities. SEDL resources include a guide and resource materials for starting a Collaborative Action Team; for a limited number of sites, SEDL also provides ongoing training and consultations. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East Seventh Street, Austin, Texas, 78701, 800/476-6861. www.sedl.org.

Center for School Change

The *Center for School Change*, based at the University of Minnesota, works with both rural and inner-city schools, helping to establish school/community teams that plan and implement innovative programs. Grants are available to rural Minnesota communities. Resources include (1) workshops for grantees, which include parents, administrators, teachers, community people, and, in the case of secondary schools, students; (2) outreach coordinators, whereby CSC staff work closely with planning and implementation sites; and (3) evaluation and assessment; staff work with each site to help them assess progress. Further information can be accessed at www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change. Joe Nathan is director of the Center for School Change, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University Minnesota, 301 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455, and can be reached at 612/626-1834.

School at the Center

The *School at the Center* project was established in 1990 by two professors at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Its mission is to place the school at the center of the community, thereby contributing to rural renewal both culturally and economically. Described as an education without walls, School at the Center curriculum transforms communities into working laboratories. Assistance is provided by the Nebraska University Teachers College, the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, and businesses and agencies including the Nebraska departments of economic development and education. Major funding is through the Annenberg Rural Challenge. Contact Paul Olson, Foundation Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, 338B Andrews Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0333, 402/472-3198; www.unl.edu/alumni/school.htm.

Foxfire Fund, Inc.

The *Foxfire Fund, Inc.* supports active, learner-centered approaches to teaching that promote "continuous interaction between students and their communities so that students will find fulfillment as creative, productive, critical citizens." Foxfire provide teacher training, materials, and networking support, and produces a quarterly journa for teachers, *The Active Learner*. The Foxfire Fund, Inc., P.O. Box 541, Mountain City Georgia, 30562, 706/746-5828, www.foxfire.org.

PACERS Small Schools Coorperative

The *PACERS Small Schools Cooperative*, operated by the University of Alabama's Program for Rural Services and Research, helps rural schools to implement a program titled "Better Schools Building Better Communities." The program consists of three interrelated components: "Genius of Place," "Sustaining Communities: Shelter, Food, Good Work, Health," and "Joy." Resources that are provided include a PACERS e-mail account and linking teachers to the Alabama Course of Study. For further information contact the Program for Rural Services and Research, University of Alabama, Box 870372, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487, 205/348-6432, www.Pacers.org/rurserv.htm.

Arkansas site takes the initiative

Most folks wouldn't expect a sleepy little community in north central Arkansas to be a hotbed of innovation. But Marshall, Arkansas—one of SEDL's newest Collaborative Action Team sites—boasts not one but two promising new service learning projects.

In one, school staff are cooperating with the Searcy County Literacy Council to implement a tutoring program in which high school seniors work with younger students. The seniors receive a unit of credit for their activities, which range from helping with seventh-grade math to working with kindergarten students on manners and communication skills. High school counselor Don Clifton recruits tutors and works with teachers to identify students in need of help. The literacy council's peer tutoring coordinator, Kari Balcom, trains students in tutoring strategies and monitors their progress. Tutors maintain a log of their time and the topics they address in their tutoring sessions.

This year the high school is also implementing a technology-based service learning project called Environmental and Spatial Technology (EAST), a program first started by Tim Stephenson in Greenbrier, Arkansas. Marshall High School offers three classes, each with 10 students, as an elective for grades 9 to 12. There are no prerequisites, and students who have had academic difficulties are encouraged to enroll.

The facilitator for Marshall's EAST project, Jerry Prince, was formerly the journalism teacher. Describing himself as "semi-familiar with computers," he notes that his training as project facilitator focused not on technology but rather on an instructional philosophy that stresses problem-solving—an approach that carries over to the classes themselves. The primary goal of the course is not to teach technology but to help students develop higher-order thinking skills. Given project-based assignments, such as surveying a farm or designing a web page to inform the community about school activities, students must figure out for themselves how to use the equipment and software they need to complete the project. Prince describes the experience as a novel and unsettling one for most students, since throughout their years of schooling "somebody in the classroom has always had the answer." Prince asks students to pretend they are employees in his company, pointing out, "You don't ask the company president to tell you how to do your job." Interestingly, Prince says, it's the straight-A students who often have the most difficulty adjusting to this new learning environment. In the end, though, the approach has "fantastic" results: "Once those kids taste success, get out of the way."

Other projects may soon crop up in Marshall as well, including a technology-based career education program. As Don Clifton notes, "We've got plenty of ideas; what's missing are the human resources to carry them all out." Clifton and Prince describe the school's new Collaborative Action Team as a promising source for both plans and person-power.

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Evaluations of service learning projects, while sketchy, do point to tangible student gains. According to Stephens, evaluations "have almost uniformly pointed to improved critical thinking" (p. 208), as well as greater self-esteem. Academic gains also have been documented, especially in studies of mentoring and tutoring projects.

Examples and resources

Service learning projects can be as varied as the imaginations of those who create them. In her guide to service learning, Stephens includes more than 400 examples. The following paragraphs illustrate some of this variety, and also introduce resource agencies that may be able to help you get started, by providing models and examples, resource information, training, or other kinds of assistance (see page 4, *Resource information*).

The *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory*, which produces these issues papers, works with schools and communities to help plan and implement partnership projects. Among SEDL's rural Collaborative Action Team sites are communities such as Marshall, Arkansas (see sidebar on page 5), and Balmorhea, Texas, where student work in the health clinic is tied to the school's health sciences curriculum. Balmorhea students also help operate a weather station that provides data for area ranchers and farmers. In Los Lunas, New Mexico, another CAT site, elementary students have helped to carry out neighborhood cleanups. First-grade students in Los Lunas are involved in mentoring pre-kindergarten students, while in Fabens, Texas, high school students tutor kids in the lower grades. And in Clinton, Oklahoma, students are gathering information and making presentations to influence the town's plans for designing park lands adjacent to a local brick factory.

Schools involved with the *Center for School Change*, based at the University of Minnesota, implement a school curriculum that helps students develop community pride and knowledge of local history, culture, and economy. In one high school, students publish a

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magazine about their home town's history and also operate a community center, which includes both a meeting place for senior citizens and a drop-in center for students. In other rural communities, students work with a local adult volunteer on a prairie restoration program or participate in River Watch and the Midwestern River Project, two of the largest environmental networks gathering data on the Mississippi River.

The *School at the Center* project at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln provides assistance with service learning activities through which students explore community history and heritage. In addition, students in two school districts are studying various ways for rural residents to save energy, especially through the use of wind power and energy-efficient buildings. And several school districts have involved students in the study and care of a large Nebraska nature preserve.

Perhaps one of the best-known resources for community-based learning activities, the *Foxfire Fund*, Inc. supports active, learner-centered approaches to teaching that promote "continuous interaction between students and their communities." One fifth grade class "adopted" the local Humane Society's animal shelter, conducting a letter-writing campaign to raise funds and designing and selling t-shirts. Students in Idaho helped to plant trees and to monitor their growth. A seventh grade classroom in New Jersey created an outdoor learning environment at the school, working with a local architect to plan the design. Students developed a budget, wrote fundraising letters, and kept track of donations and expenses.

The *PACERS Small Schools Cooperative*, operated by the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama, helps participating schools to implement several interrelated community learning components. In one component, titled Genius of Place, students study their own communities and document local history and culture through songs, oral histories, and photographs. Through the Sustaining Communities component, students may build or repair houses, produce and preserve food, or administer health inventories to other students and community residents.

Conclusions

The future of rural schools is inextricably linked to the future of their surrounding communities, and service learning is a powerful tool for capitalizing on those links. In many ways, perhaps, rural areas are fortunate that their interdependence is so clearly visible. For in the larger scheme of things, all schools must look to the community to help students emerge as good citizens as well as scholars. As the visionary educator Joseph K. Hart stated back in 1924,

> The democratic problem in education is not primarily a problem of training children: It is a problem of making a community in which children cannot help growing up to be democratic, intelligent, disciplined to freedom, reverent of the goods of life and eager to share in the tasks of the age. A school cannot produce this result: nothing but a community can do so. (quoted in Nelson, 1995, p. 22)

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